



Combat Camera Imagery (Val Gempis)

# ASSESSING U.S. Strategic Priorities

By HANS BINNENDIJK and PATRICK CLAWSON

**F**ive years after the Cold War lapsed, the United States is still searching for a new strategic compass. A clear understanding of global security trends, national interests, and strategic priorities is essential to sound foreign and defense policy. The following appraisal, based on *Strategic Assessment 1995*, a new publication of the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University, offers a framework for developing national security policies as the century draws to a close.

## A New World Order

There have been five world orders since America gained independence that are defined by the character of relations among great powers during each period: the Napoleonic, the Congress of Vienna, Germany's drive to become a leading power (accompanied by the carving up of Africa and Asia among the colonial powers), the League of Nations, and the Cold War (along with the eclipse of colonization). At present we are entering a sixth period, one in which European concerns may not dominate the world as they have over the last several centuries.

## Summary

The traditional ideological divisions among nations are being replaced by a tripartite global system of market democracies, transitional states, and troubled states. Above all, the United States must be concerned over the course of transitional states, since they will be influential in determining the world order of the future. Troubled states, however, are the likely source of local conflicts in the years ahead. This suggests four priorities in formulating national strategy that include, in order of importance, ensuring peace among the major powers, engaging selectively in regional conflicts, responding to transnational threats, and assisting failed states. One consequence of these priorities is that the Nation may be required to reconsider its nearly two-major-regional-conflicts strategy in order to maintain a balanced force structure. The implications of that decision would have significant import for strategic planning and the capability to conduct joint operations.

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Transitions between these orders have typically lasted several years. The one underway is likely to take longer than most because there was no definitive, cataclysmic end to the last order, and because the international system is truly global, not just European. While its nature is becoming clearer each year, the emerging order may not fully gel until after the end of the decade. The fluid character of the world order is a major reason why recent administrations in Washington have had such difficulties articulating a U.S. policy vision and deciding when to use force to support U.S. interests.

The final shape of the emerging world order will depend crucially upon such factors as the degree of U.S. involvement in world affairs, the progress of European integration, developments inside Russia, the extent to which Japan assumes new international obligations, the ability of China to hold

together and remain on a path to prosperity, and the control of nuclear proliferation.

The emerging world order is arranged along different lines than those of the Cold War. In particular, ideology is no longer the basis of division, although the ideals of democracy and free markets that gave the Free World victory in the Cold War remain important. The emerging lines of division appear to be the following:

▼ *Market democracies* comprise a growing community of free and prosperous (or at least rapidly developing) nations that is expanding from North America, Japan, and much of Europe to large parts of East Asia, Latin America, and Central Europe.

▼ *Transitional states* are ex-authoritarian and ex-communist lands that are working toward democracy and free markets, as well as countries such as India that seem to be making progress toward freedom and prosperity from a low baseline. Many states in this category run the risk of backslid-

ing into political chaos and economic decline. The future of the transitional states will be one of the most important determinants of the new system.

▼ *Troubled states*, primarily located in Africa, the greater Middle East, and parts of Asia, are falling behind the rest of the globe economically, politically, and ecologically. Many are plagued with rampant ethnic and religious extremism; some are failed states that are slipping into anarchy. A few—like Cuba and North Korea—are decaying, die-hard communist dictatorships; others are, or threaten to become, rogue states.

Some important countries fall into two or even three of the above categories. For instance, China can be considered transitional: economically, it is moving toward a market democracy. On the other hand its politics resemble those of a troubled state which leads many analysts to fear that instability when Deng Xiaoping dies could push much of China back into the troubled camp.

Despite the indefinite nature of the dividing lines, the overall trend suggests a growing gap between market democracies and troubled states. The gap reveals differences in economic growth, political stability, and adherence to international human rights standards.

Divisions among market democracies, transitional states, and troubled states is not the only way in which analysts see the world evolving. Other lines of division are emphasized by national security analysts.

*Economic/political blocs.* Regional blocs based on trade and political cooperation seem to be emerging in Europe, the Americas, East Asia, and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The proportion of foreign trade and investment in each bloc is rising. The implications for the world order of such blocs, if consolidated, depend on how open or closed they are to trade and political cooperation with states outside of their region. The danger of tension, possibly escalating into conflict, is greatest in the case of blocs that jealously guard themselves from outside influence and that see world trade and politics as zero-sum games. With the possible exception of CIS, such closed blocs do not seem to be emerging. Thus the development of economic and political blocs is not as important at present for understanding national security interests as is the split among market democracies, transitional states, and troubled states.

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the new world order is being shaped by technological change as well as by democratic values

*Spheres of influence around a great power.* Closely related to the emergence of economic and political blocs has been the focus of military attention by the great powers in their spheres of influence. Peace operations serve as an illustration. For example, recent Security Council debates on Rwanda, Haiti, and Georgia made clear that the major powers

are accepting the principle that each can take some responsibility for its respective areas of interest, with France, the United States, and Russia taking the lead. As with the economic blocs, the chief concern is with exclusivity. If a great power seeks to exclude the influence of other powers and to compel its weaker neighbors to act against their interests, then neo-empires could develop and great powers could clash over the boundaries between their domains. America has historically rejected a notion of national security based on great power maneuvering. U.S. policy has been most successful and acceptable when it is based on both national values and interests.

*Civilization.* Ancient divisions among cultures, ethnic groups, and religions seem to have retained more political importance than many would have thought a few years ago. The fault line between Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy closely resembles the line of conflict between warring parties in the former Yugoslavia and, generally, the di-

vision separating Central European states that are doing well both economically and politically and those that are floundering. In many regions where the Islamic world meets other civilizations (such as northern India, the Levant, and Caucasus) violence erupts. While culture, ethnicity, and religion must not be overestimated, they seem to exacerbate and lend emotional depth to strife caused by concrete historical grievances, political disputes, and geostrategic factors. We are therefore skeptical about using civilization division as a primary basis for arranging the emerging world order.

In this system of market democracies, transitional states, and troubled states, three types of conflict correspond loosely to those three groups, namely:

▼ Conflict among the major powers is the greatest concern to the United States but is least likely to occur. The great powers—the United States, Japan, China, Russia, and the major states of Western Europe—are at peace with each other. No power feels threatened by another; no power is actively preparing for conflict with another. This situation, almost unprecedented in history, is a powerful basis for U.S. security so long as it lasts, which may not be forever.

▼ Conflict among regional powers, mainly involving either transitional or troubled states, will occur periodically, often as the result of aggressive states seeking regional hegemony. The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction could increase the propensity of aggressive states to threaten their neighbors and world peace.

▼ Conflict involving troubled states, nearly always starting within a country, is likely to be the most prevalent form. At the same time, this type of conflict is the least threatening to U.S. interests. The great powers are often willing to provide economic and political support for troubled states. However, they are increasingly reluctant to intervene militarily unless a crisis threatens to escalate and engulf other states, create a humanitarian disaster, or affect other great power interests.

### The Trends

The new world order is being shaped by political, economic, and military trends which are rooted in technological change as well as by a diffusion of democratic values.

*Proliferation is increasingly a contemporary, not a future concern.* Nuclear weapons programs by rogue states are difficult to stop despite the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.



C-141 in Goma, Zaire, during Support Hope.

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America is increasingly prone to placing economic concerns ahead of defense issues

The acquisition of nuclear weapons by a rogue state could destabilize whole regions and severely complicate U.S. power projection operations. The problem is likely to get worse on the supply side. Many countries are developing the industrial base to produce nuclear weapons (by now a fifty-year-old technology), and continuing economic problems in the former Soviet Union are

making criminal diversion of nuclear material and know-how more likely. Access to chemical and biological weapons may prove even easier. The challenge is to persuade countries that ac-

quire the technical ability to produce weapons of mass destruction not to make use of that capacity.

*Economic interests as opposed to traditional security interests are becoming more important to governments.* Thanks to the peace among the great powers, states are free to turn their attention to other issues. Successful states see security not only in terms of military preparedness but also in terms of a strong economy. Concerns about prosperity and employment are playing a greater role in shaping international and domestic policies. America is increasingly prone to placing economic concerns ahead of defense issues. It is also likely to place concerns over the budget deficit, low levels of national savings, and investment needs ahead of the long-term impact of current reductions in defense expenditures.

*The domestic focus of many countries limits national security capabilities.* In much of the world, public opinion is less concerned about foreign policy, largely due to the end of the Cold War and peace among the major powers. At the same time, there is a preoccupation with domestic issues such as worsening social ills and the low economic growth rates of the last twenty years. As a result of this emphasis and the realization that the great danger to world peace—the Soviet threat—is gone, public opinion now insists on lower defense spending. This translates into a reluctance to deploy forces overseas. Sustained commitments are especially unwelcome, as distinct from emergencies. Also, emergency operations are impeded by increasing public sensitivity to casualties, particularly in situations that are not considered vital to national interests.

*Information technology is displacing heavy industry as the base of national power.* Those industries growing most rapidly are in the computer and communications fields which continue to introduce new technology at breathtaking rates. Extending this trend to the battlefield suggests that information-based warfare will become widespread in a decade or two. Defense requirements will demand greater investment in information systems and less in tanks, ships, and aircraft.

*International organizations are assuming a legitimizing role despite their limited capability and potential encroachment on national sovereignty.* The weight of international organizations is felt most strongly in the desire for market democracies to seek authorization to use force. While the Cold War legitimized the Free World alliance and left the United Nations impotent, the passing of the Cold War has given life to the U.N. role in legitimizing the use of force. However, the first blush of enthusiasm for multilateral action has faded as international organizations prove to be less than effective in humanitarian disasters and civil wars. The Clinton administration underwent a sea change from an early embrace of assertive multilateralism to outright caution in Presidential Decision Directive 25 issued in May 1994. Multilateral action has proven difficult because of differing political objectives among states and organizations, delays in making timely decisions, the limited capabilities of multilateral organizations and ad hoc coalitions, public sensitivity to casualties, and the cost of operating in a multilateral fashion. Nonetheless, the United States will need to form ad hoc coalitions to respond to crisis in areas once judged peripheral when the main mission was Soviet containment. Regional organizations may lead in resolving local problems, or the United Nations may delegate its role to the powers most affected.

*Globalization is creating transnational threats as well as benefits.* Technological advances and open societies allow an unprecedented free movement of ideas, people, and goods. The pulse of the planet has quickened and with it the pace of change in human events. These trends are likely to continue as communication costs fall and

the World Trade Organization facilitates dismantling of trade obstacles. Trade, finance, and communications are all becoming global. Computers, faxes, fiber optic cables, and satellites speed flows of information across frontiers, as illustrated by the explosive growth of Internet. While most flows are beneficial, some of the flood across borders is pernicious. For example, both pro-democracy activists and the proponents of ethnic cleansing can easily disseminate their respective views. Transnational threats take various forms: terrorism, the internationalization of crime centering on illegal drugs (or even the smuggling of nuclear material), international environmental problems such as global warming and ozone depletion, and disruptive migration resulting from political strife or natural disasters.

*Democracy is becoming the global ideal, if not the global norm.* Democracy has proven to be contagious. The world has experienced a wave of democratization since the 1970s. In Latin America and Central Europe, it is the norm, not the exception. Even in Asia and Africa, where many governments remain autocratic in practice, most feel compelled to present themselves as democratic or in transition to democracy. The overthrow of democratically-elected governments has become unacceptable in the eyes of the world community. But elections are no guarantee that freedom will prevail. In some places elections have been held before the emergence of a free press and other institutions, resulting in a fear that some nations may experience "one person, one vote, one time."

*The sovereign state is losing its unique role as the fundamental unit of organization within the world system.* As economies become intertwined, it is difficult to identify what constitutes an American or German corporation. Financial markets are so interconnected that control of interest and exchange rates by central banks is increasingly attenuated. With the explosion of international communications and cultural links, news, fashions, and ideas are more global and less national. As globalization proceeds, governments lose some measure of control and are less able to address the problems of their citizens. Frustrated by the inability of governments to resolve their problems, people may turn away from the sovereign state and embrace more local politics. Thus, fragmentation pressures

are often related to the decreasing ability of states to respond to the needs of their people. Fragmentation pressures take various forms, but sovereign states face no greater threat than minorities whose desire to break away is sometimes justified by their treatment at the hands of intolerant majorities. It is difficult to reconcile the principles of majority rule and national self-determination when a cohesive minority wants to opt out of a larger state. The sad results of such intra-state tensions can be seen in many places, as violent ethnic and ethno-religious conflicts are becoming more common and more bloody.

#### U.S. Involvement

In his 1994 *National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement*, President Clinton stated: "Our national security strategy is based on enlarging the community of market democracies while deterring and containing a range of threats to our nation, our allies, and our interests." Such a strategy stresses three primary objectives: enhancing security, promoting domestic prosperity, and advancing democracy. An analysis of world trends and U.S. interests tends to confirm the importance of these goals.

Unlike the Cold War, the United States no longer has to dedicate its resources to achieving a single overriding goal. With its primary interests easier to achieve, the Nation is free to pay more attention to secondary goals. But not all of those goals are worth pursuing simultaneously, given costs and competing domestic claims on resources. Hence, America must be selective about where to get involved. The United States is most likely to engage where it can simultaneously promote its national interests and values.

Whereas the Cold War priority was to contain communism, the new focus of U.S. foreign and defense policies is engagement and enlargement—and expanding the community of market democracies. Enlargement has several aspects, some more vital than others:

▼ Sustaining democracy and free markets in countries where it is well-rooted is vital. But this does not require urgent efforts, since free institutions usually face little challenge in the market democracies.



▼ Promoting a move from authoritarianism to democracy in transitional states (such as Russia, South Africa, and Central Europe) is both vital and time-consuming for policymakers.

▼ Encouraging free markets and democracy in troubled states is difficult. While it is critical from the perspective of promoting American values and serving long-term geostrategic interests by fostering a stable world order, enlargement to encompass the troubled states is not a top priority from the perspective of short-term national security interests.

#### U.S. Priorities

In terms of traditional security interests, and putting aside other important considerations such as economics, a series of significant priorities flows from the above analysis. *The first is ensuring peace among the major powers.* Though the health of alliances with Japan and Europe is primary, the United States also wants good working relations with Russia and China which will be easier if there is a transition to democracy and free markets in those countries. Besides having good bilateral relations with the major powers, the Nation also benefits from the peaceful resolution of disputes among the major powers.

Creating mechanisms for nonviolent conflict resolution will become all the more urgent if the world does divide into distinct great power spheres of influence, because history suggests that those powers tend eventually to fight over the boundaries of such zones. To date, these spheres of influence are too amorphous to identify possible conflicts. But clashes could arise, for example, in Asia, where the pattern of influence remains muddled, or in Central Europe, which lacks clear lines separating possible spheres of influence. This interest in peace among the great powers is not likely to get the same close attention devoted to troublesome regional crises, but the deterioration of relations among the major powers would be more threatening to the United States in the long term than any regional crisis.

*The second priority is engaging selectively in regional conflicts.* Washington will hopefully decide to exercise leadership primarily in those situations where both U.S. interests and principles are at stake, rather than where only its principles are tested. Priority should be given to traditional commitments and cases in which action is now needed to prevent a greater danger later, particularly

against rogue states that refuse to adjust peacefully into the world system. The most likely areas of involvement are in traditional regions of concern: the Korean peninsula, Persian Gulf, Levant, and the Caribbean. This list is by no means exhaustive, since America could fight almost anywhere if significant interests were at risk. In defending vital interests and principles, the Nation must be prepared to use decisive force. It must also be prepared to act alone, although acting as part of a coalition is preferable as long as America exercises leadership in that coalition.

*The third priority is responding to transnational threats* such as drug trafficking, terrorism, and illegal refugees, problems which cross national borders. While it is not always clear which assets are best suited to respond to such hazards on the national level, some threats seem to call for military involvement rather than reliance on only the traditional tools: government regulation or police who are often outgunned and outmaneuvered by criminal syndicates. Quasi-police operations have been conducted routinely by the militaries of many nations including the United States. But there can be resistance in the Armed Forces to using scarce resources for quasi-police functions when the natural inclination is to focus on preparing for major conflicts rather than being drawn into situations where the military is less obviously needed. On the other hand, the absence of great power strife or major regional conflicts provides the luxury of using the military for other missions. One reason to give priority to such transnational threats is the risk that if left unattended these problems can escalate and affect vital interests or create massive humanitarian disasters, which would then demand U.S. intervention on a much larger scale.

*The fourth priority is assisting failed states.* Americans are likely to aid such states in those cases where the military can respond constructively and at relatively low cost. An example is providing relief in the wake of a humanitarian disaster. Likewise, if local violence threatens to spill over international borders, monitors and military aid can be effective. Similarly, if parties to a conflict agree upon a political solution but are suspicious of the willingness of the other side to live up to its promises, peacekeepers can make a difference.

Messy internal conflicts create problems for military intervention. Yet public pressure to prevent a humanitarian disaster or genocide can encourage intervention in cases where America has few direct and immediate interests, as in Somalia which caused difficult foreign and defense policy problems for the last two administrations. In general, the role of the Armed Forces in failed states will be to provide humanitarian aid, protect non-combatants, and prevent conflicts from spreading to other countries. The military is less likely to play a major role in nation-building, at which its record is mixed at best. But the services are unlikely to avoid all nation-building responsibilities, as our intervention in Haiti demonstrates. One danger in nation-building is that restoring political institutions often leads to choosing sides in an ongoing conflict. The side not chosen may then see American forces as the enemy and attack them, leading to casualties that erode public support for the operation. Of course, humanitarian operations can also have a downside: underlying problems that were suppressed when the Armed Forces were present often re-emerge after those forces have departed, leading to questions about the efficacy of intervention.

Forming coalitions for peace operations is difficult. No nation, including the United States, wants to take responsibility for leadership in those cases where history and common sense suggest that intervention will be lengthy, costly, and complicated. When national interests are not directly at issue, America may choose to be marginally involved or to press for a clear exit strategy should intervention go badly.

#### Implications for the Armed Forces

By combining these trends and priorities certain implications for the Armed Forces can be drawn in order to prepare for conflicts that may be encountered in the coming years.

*Balancing forces among fundamentally different missions.* The military will be expected to accomplish four basic missions, flowing from the four priorities listed above. Re-



Rangers loading on board USS George Washington.

U.S. Army (Joe Hendricks)

sources may be insufficient to accomplish all of them equally well. Thus, Washington is likely to face difficult choices about how to allocate available resources. These missions are, in priority:

▼ Hedging against the emergence of a peer competitor over the next two decades. This requires developing capabilities for leading edge warfare. The Armed Forces want to be better positioned than any potential rival to exploit new, commercially developed technologies for military use. Taking advantage of the revolution in military affairs requires new doctrine and organization as well as new technology. While easy to overlook in the short run, this mission may well be the most vital in the long run.

▼ Preparing for major regional conflicts with rogue states. This calls for careful stewardship of a ready force with superior warfighting capabilities. Much current military analysis, including the Bottom-Up Review, is focused on this challenge. The nightmare scenario is two nearly simultaneous major regional conflicts, such as one in the Persian Gulf and another on the Korean peninsula. In view of likely budgetary constraints, success in such a situation may well require regional allies.

▼ Developing cost-effective responses to meet transnational threats. Operations such as interdicting illegal immigrants, intercepting narcotics shipments, and fighting forest fires will be one part of the military's vigorous engagement in support of national interests. At the same time, such missions do not require expensive combat systems. Nor should such operations be allowed to tie up personnel with specialized combat skills for extended periods.

▼ Engaging selectively in troubled states. The Armed Forces may prefer to minimize this mission, both to husband resources for major conflicts and to avoid so-called "mission creep" (in particular, humanitarian operations that take



on aspects of nation-building for which the military is ill suited). But the hard reality is that failed states are becoming more common and the American public often insists on intervention in the face of massive humanitarian disasters.

The United States should increasingly expect to operate with ad hoc coalitions rather than alliances. There is no overpowering threat that will cement new enduring alliances the way the Soviet threat brought NATO into being. Like-minded states, including NATO members, will not always agree on which regional crisis deserves attention, so coalitions will shift from case to case. Public

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opinion, in the United States and abroad, will typically insist on intervention by a coalition rather than by America alone, even if coalition partners add nothing to—or even complicate—the military equation. Most important, if defense spending declines, the United

States will need to increasingly rely on coalition partners to accomplish the four missions discussed above.

Military planning should be keyed to capabilities, not threats. After fifty years of a patent threat, the military may have to return to a method of planning which addresses a world full of unforeseen dangers. The best way to plan for the unknown is to identify the sorts of tasks that the military will be assigned, not to guess about the specifics. A capability of growing importance will be interaction with coalition partners.

The Armed Forces must identify appropriate command structures. The trend in the military has been toward placing more power under CINCs. Information technology and communications, however, are shifting power to those with the most powerful computers and the largest number of sensors, regardless of location, which could mean empowering Washington at the expense of the regional commanders. At the same time, the punch packed by the individual soldier is increasing, eroding the role of field commanders and resulting in flatter command and control structures. The fluidity of the political scene also complicates the formation of stable command divisions, since crises may flow across the areas of responsibility fixed during the Cold War.

The military should anticipate a decline in the importance of large weapons platforms. Classical organizations—formations with tanks, ships, and aircraft—are no longer the sole pillars of military might. For major industrial countries, integrating advanced weapons and communication/sensing systems is increasingly the key to success in war. It has two effects: some platforms are becoming more vulnerable to precision-guided munitions and smaller weapons come along with smaller platforms. In less technologically advanced nations, success in limited warfare against major powers may be possible by deploying “silver-bullet” weapons systems that can accomplish one particular task well (for example, brilliant mines or portable anti-aircraft weapons). With the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, dispersed forces are more attractive than concentrations of forces.

#### The Bottom Line

It will not be possible to meet all four missions and deal with the other challenges described above if budget cuts continue at the current rate. If they do continue, the pressures to maintain a two major-regional-conflict capability and to undertake peace operations could require Pentagon planners to neglect the top priority of the Armed Forces, hedging against a future peer competitor by taking full advantage of the revolution in military affairs. **JFQ**